

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 639

EA 028 815

AUTHOR Wiget, Lawrence A.
TITLE Legislation and the Public Schools: Making It Work. Fastback 420.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, IN.
ISBN ISBN-0-87367-620-3
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 48p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, 408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789; phone: 812-339-1156.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; *Government School Relationship; Higher Education; Institutional Advancement; *Lobbying; Policy Formation; *Politics of Education; Public Relations; *Public Schools; *State Legislation

ABSTRACT

Much of what educators do--and the resources for carrying out those activities--are influenced by politics. The purpose of this fastback is to help educators learn how to influence state-level political processes that affect schools. The fastback describes how to apply the principles of effective government relations, how to influence legislative and regulatory processes, and how to build active support from internal and external school publics. The principles of effective government-education relations include: (1) Remember who votes; (2) education speaks with many voices; (3) education must compete for resources; (4) legislators are elected; (5) school board members are politicians, too; (6) good laws take time to make; (7) it is easier to kill a bill than to pass one; (8) today's foe is tomorrow's friend; and (9) quantity does not equal quality. The booklet also describes the checks and balances in state government, the implications for a successful government-relations program, the process through which a bill becomes a law, the legislative session schedule, and the regulatory process. The appendix contains a primer on legislative protocol (lobbying and presenting testimony). (LMI)

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FASTBACK

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Legislation and the Public Schools: Making It Work

Lawrence A. Wiget

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Lawrence A. Wiget

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Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Legislation and the Public Schools: Making It Work

by
Lawrence A. Wiget

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 97-69146

ISBN 0-87367-620-3

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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the
University of Pittsburgh-Three Rivers
Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which
made a generous contribution
toward publication costs.

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Introduction

Providing for public education is a state responsibility. Most laws and regulations regarding public schools are determined by state legislatures and state regulatory agencies, such as a state's department of education or department of public instruction. A significant portion of school funding also is determined by state legislatures.

For the past five years, my primary responsibility in the Anchorage School District has been to work with state legislators and state and municipal government agencies to achieve the district's legislative goals. During that time, I have found that the issues facing the Anchorage School District are not much different from issues facing school districts across the country.

Across the nation, there are calls for greater accountability by public school districts for the money they receive from local, state, and federal governments and for better management of the education facilities entrusted to them. The public, as well as various government bodies, is looking to schools for a greater emphasis on academic excellence, higher test scores, and higher standards for academic programs; for safer environments in

which to educate students; for greater parent and public involvement in education; for more educational choices; for greater cooperation between public schools and social service agencies; and for greater local control of the public schools.

At the same time these issues are being debated, the Congress is wrestling with their collective desire to reduce the federal deficit, control spending, and reduce taxes, in the process often shifting funding responsibilities from the federal government back to the states. The states, at the insistence of their constituents, also are seeking ways to control spending and reduce taxes. Thus the demand for a reduction in federal and state spending, combined with a call for education reform, has focused attention on how schools can work with the various legislatures and other government entities to achieve their reform and improvement goals.

Everyone agrees that the purpose of public education is to educate all children. However, defining the nature of public education in terms of when it should begin, how long it should last, how much it should cost, who should pay for it, and what curriculum it should teach are where agreement ends and public (and legislative) debate begins. The debate over the role of government in public education is an important aspect of school governance, because decisions that affect how schools operate often are made through the power of the vote, through compromise, and, all too often, through political influence. As a result, educators must realize that much of what they do — and the resources they will have to do it with — is influenced by politics.

The opinions and beliefs of local, state, and national legislators are formed on personal experience, as well as on what they hear from their constituents and in the media. A two-way flow of information between educators and legislators and other government officials is needed to enhance mutual understanding of education issues and to build trust and credibility — on both sides. Teachers and administrators need to become involved in the political process. If educators do not communicate with legislators or shun such involvement, the information void will be filled by others who may not have the best interests of public education in mind.

The purpose of this fastback is to help educators learn how to influence state-level political processes that affect schools. In particular, readers will learn 1) how to apply the principles of effective government relations, 2) how to influence legislative and regulatory processes, and 3) how to build active support from internal and external school publics. This information will be somewhat general, as various states operate in different ways; however, the basic principles and strategies are universal. As many school districts, particularly in smaller communities, do not employ a government relations expert, this fastback may serve as a useful primer for individuals who find themselves cast in that role.

Principles of Effective Government Relations for Education

Government relations in public education is the relationship a school district has with local, state, and federal governments and their agencies that determine the laws and regulations that govern the operation of the public school system. The following are 10 principles for educators to remember in building and maintaining effective government relations for public education:

1. Remember Who Votes.

Taxpayers vote. Business owners vote; parents and nonparents alike vote on education issues. Educators must communicate with voters — as well as with legislators — because many individuals and organizations are affected by and affect the funding, legislation, or regulation of public school education. Involving school children in political matters is both unethical and unwise.

2. Education Speaks with Many Voices.

Individuals and groups supporting public education do not speak with a single voice. On any given issue

there may be many points of view within the education community, where there also are competing interests. For example, the school board, the PTA, and teacher and administrative groups all may have differing positions on a proposed piece of legislation. Therefore, building coalitions among the various education groups is an essential component of an effective government relations program.

3. Education Must Compete for Resources.

Providing for public education is a state responsibility and often the largest item in a state's operating budget. However, many in the legislature view public education as merely another special interest group, one of many vying for attention and public funds.

4. Legislators Are Elected.

Legislators respond to the will of their constituents, to the needs of special interest groups, and to pressure from the media. Thus the decisions legislators make often are politically motivated. Part of being successful as a legislator is staying in office in order to influence legislation.

5. School Board Members Are Politicians, Too.

School board members are politicians because they also are elected. School board members, like other elected officials, must respond to the will of their constituents, the needs of special interest groups, and pressure applied by the media in order to stay in office. Consequently, their decisions, too, often will be politically motivated.

6. *Good Laws Take Time to Make.*

Good laws often take a long time to get through the legislative process. In fact, it often takes longer than a single legislative session to pass a piece of truly important legislation. Sometimes it is necessary to put forth an idea over several sessions and let it gather support gradually. For example, if a major funding increase is needed for education, it may take several sessions to build the necessary support from legislators to get it through the legislature, particularly during times when public funds are limited.

7. *It Is Easier to Kill a Bill than to Pass One.*

Hundreds of bills are introduced during a legislative session, and only a few make it through to become law. Reaching agreement on the specifics of a bill means that a critical number of legislators' interests must converge. Educators working with the legislature need to recognize three types of goals: 1) to prevail by motivating a majority of legislators to pass a needed bill, 2) to urge compromise if such compromise will ensure passage of key components of a positive bill, or 3) to work for a bill's defeat if it is contrary to the legislative goals of the schools.

8. *Today's Foe Is Tomorrow's Friend.*

The legislator who worked against the school district's interests last year, or against the last piece of legislation the district supported, may be the person whose support is needed to pass the next bill. Therefore, it does not pay to alienate legislators who may become allies in the future.

9. Quantity Does Not Equal Quality.

The success of a school district's government relations efforts must be measured by the quality of legislation passed or the goals accomplished, not by the quantity of bills introduced or passed. A school district may have ten issues it would like to see achieved during a given legislative session, from the basic funding of the state's share of the operating budget to numerous changes to laws and regulations. The district must focus on a few key issues important to the district. Trying to tackle too many issues during a legislative session likely will result in the failure of all. No school district has the time or resources to accomplish all of its goals during a single legislative session — and neither do the legislators.

10. Be a Problem Solver.

Educators who work with elected officials need to be problem solvers, not problems. They should be prepared to offer suggestions and possible solutions to the issues being set before the legislators. If a district is requesting funds, for example, school officials should be prepared to demonstrate why those funds are needed and how they will be used — and where they will come from.

Checks and Balances in State Government

The following information summarizes what most educators learned in their high school government class, but it is essential information to understand the dynamics of working with governmental bodies. At the state level, as at the federal level, there are three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. The three branches serve to "check and balance" one another's actions. But each has its own internal system of checks and balances, or authority, with regard to the laws and regulations of the state. Understanding these checks and balances is an essential aspect of a successful government relations program.

The Executive Branch

The executive branch of state government is composed of the governor and his or her cabinet and includes such state agencies as the department of education or department of public instruction. The executive branch is responsible for proposing a state budget, including

state funds for education. The executive branch also can propose state laws and develops and implements regulations for laws passed by the legislature.

In the legislative process, in addition to proposing legislation, the greatest power of the executive branch lies in the ability to sign or veto bills or, in some states, such portions of bills as line-item appropriations.

In the regulatory process, through the executive branch's departments and agencies, its greatest power lies in determining 1) how provisions set forth in the state constitution or laws passed by the legislature will be administered, 2) how state funds will be allocated, and 3) how federal funds that must pass through the executive branch's agencies before being distributed to school districts will be administered.

Most governors are elected to a four-year term of office. The commissioner or state superintendent of education is either appointed by the governor or elected directly by the voters.

The Legislative Branch

A state's legislature is its lawmaking branch of government. In most states the legislature is bicameral, or composed of two bodies, a house of representatives and a senate, like the federal Congress. In most states a legislative term lasts for two years and is composed of two sessions, which vary in length by state. In Alaska, for example, each legislative session is 120 days long, beginning in January and ending in May. Legislative terms are numbered in sequence, one number for each term.

Since the First Alaska State Legislature met in 1959, there have been 20 legislative terms, with the 20th running through 1998.

Naturally, the legislature's greatest power lies in passing legislation, which includes the state budget. If a law passed by the legislature is vetoed by the governor or an appropriation is reduced by the line-item veto, the legislature may override the governor's veto if sufficient support can be mustered. Typically, it takes two-thirds of the members of both the house and the senate to override a governor's veto of a bill or a three-fourths vote of both bodies if it is an appropriation item. If the legislature is not in session at the time of the governor's veto, the legislature must wait until the start of the next legislative session to attempt an override.

If the legislature does not like a regulation or an action of the courts with regard to a state law, it may vote to change the law. Changes to the state constitution, however, must go before the voters of the state for approval.

Almost universally, members of a state's house of representatives are elected for two years, while members of the state's senate are elected for four years. This configuration works out so that all of the members of the house and half of the members of the senate stand for election prior to the start of the first session of any two-year legislature term.

The Judicial Branch

The judiciary, which includes the federal courts if federal law is involved, is the "wild card" in the legislative

and regulatory processes. It is considered a wild card because laws passed by the legislature and signed by the governor, as well as regulations passed by the state board of education or other regulatory agencies, can be overturned or modified by the court system if they are found to violate the state or federal constitution or state or federal law. Furthermore, the courts can impose their own set of actions within the guidelines of the state laws and the constitution of the state if they are petitioned to do so. Increasingly, constituents and constituent groups who are unhappy with the actions of their legislature are turning to the court system for interpretations of state laws or judgments regarding their constitutionality.

Implications for a Successful Government Relations Program

In some cases the legislature will pass a bill, but the governor will not sign it or will veto a portion of it. This happened to the Anchorage School District in the late 1980s, when the legislature allocated several million dollars to the Anchorage School District for the purchase of computers. The governor vetoed the line-item appropriation for the computers from the bill containing the operating and capital budgets. Thus the countless hours that went into securing the computer funding from the legislature were lost in the single stroke of the governor's pen.

In other cases the governor will sign a bill, but the regulations that are developed by the regulatory agency (for example, the department of education) may stray

from what some legislators consider was the original intent of the legislation. For example, as I write this fast-back the Alaska state legislature is looking at the law it passed several years ago regarding the formation of charter schools, with the intent of revising the law on the grounds that the regulations did not go far enough. The regulations that were developed prohibit an appeal by a charter school applicant to an outside agency when their application has been rejected by the local school board. Legislation is being drafted that would revise the original law. The Anchorage School District does not support a change in the law.

In still other cases the regulations will meet the intent of the lawmakers, but the law will be challenged in the courts. The last redistricting of Alaska's legislative boundaries by the executive branch was thrown out by the courts because it violated federal law. The governor's office was then forced to resubmit a new redistricting plan to the courts for approval.

These checks and balances mean that success or failure can come at any point in the legislative or regulatory process, and the actions of any of the three branches of government can be affected. When devising a legislative strategy, therefore, school district officials must consider the possible actions of all three branches. While most of a district's government relations actions will focus on the legislative branch, it would be unwise to ignore the implications of legislation on the governor's office or the courts. School officials can sidestep some problems by working closely with regulatory agencies, such as the state's department of education, in advance of legislative

activity. And, in the case of the judiciary, it is prudent to look ahead to possible conflicts with existing regulations or state or federal laws.

The counter-measure, of course, is to look at the potential for the governor's office, a regulatory agency, or the courts to put a stop to implementation of legislation that ill serves the schools. For example, if the legislature passes the bill, the governor may be contacted and urged not sign it. Or, if the governor signs a piece of legislation into law, then the school district may seek workable interpretations at the regulatory agency, which may blunt the negative effects of a bad law. If the regulations are unbearable, the courts may offer relief.

If all else fails, there is always the chance of getting the law changed or a new bill passed during the next legislative session.

How a Bill Becomes Law

Every law begins as a bill, and every bill as an idea in the mind of someone who sees a need for a change in current law or a need for an altogether new law. From bill to law, that idea will face many obstacles and may be subjected to changes and modified by compromises before reaching the governor's desk to be signed.

Hundreds of pieces of legislation are introduced during a typical legislative session, but only a few will become laws. When a school district has a stake in a pending bill, it will benefit from monitoring the legislative process in order to intercede at appropriate times. For example, it is important to know when a bill may be debated in committee so that school officials can present their case at a committee hearing. Knowing where a bill is during the legislative process can trigger a phone call to the "right" person or a letter campaign.

School officials should check with their own state legislatures for information about the legislative process,

such as the timing of committee hearings, the persons involved in such hearings, and so on. Following is a brief overview that explains the basic sequence of events that most bills follow in becoming law. Included is a strategy statement for each step in the process.

1. From Idea to Draft Bill

Ideas for laws may come to the legislature from a number of sources, including individual constituents, lobbyists, business or professional organizations (such as a state school board association), the governor, or an individual legislator or group of legislators.

Drafting the idea into a proposed law, known as a bill, may take one of several forms, including presenting the legislator with an idea already in bill form. But the most common way for an idea to be drafted into a bill is for a legislator to assign the legislature's legal department to develop the language of a bill using the idea as the basis.

Strategy: If a school district wants a certain piece of legislation enacted — that is, a certain idea put into the form of a bill for consideration — then school officials should find a legislator or legislators to sponsor or co-sponsor the idea. These legislators should be members of the majority party or hold key committee and leadership positions so they can move a bill through the committee process. School officials can ask them to have the idea drafted into a bill. Better yet, if possible, the school people can present the idea already drafted in bill form.

2. The Committee Process

Once a bill is drafted, it is introduced and assigned to the committees in which it will be heard by the presiding officer, either the president of the senate or the speaker of the house, of the legislative body of which the sponsoring legislator is a member.

The number of committees to which a bill will be assigned depends on the nature of the proposed legislation. For example, a bill designed to lower the mandatory age at which a child must register for school will first be assigned to the Health Education and Social Services Committee (in Alaska), because it is an education issue. Then it will go to the finance committee to determine whether there are any financial implications associated with lowering the mandatory attendance age. From there, it will go to the rules committee, which will decide when the bill should be brought forward for consideration by the full legislative body.

Strategy: School officials need to monitor the bill as it goes through each committee. They can provide testimony and other appropriate support, such as letters or background information, as necessary. A bill may be changed or blocked in any committee. This is true even of the rules committee, which is charged only with putting the bill on the legislative agenda. Usually the rules committee will not make changes to a bill; however, many bills have died in the rules committee because the chair of that committee did not want to schedule the bill for consideration. Thus it will pay to monitor that committee as well as the other committees.

3. Initial Consideration

Once a bill passes through the rules committee and goes before the full legislative body of the house or senate, changes or amendments to the bill can be made from the floor of the body. Then, once the bill is passed in one chamber, it is sent to the other chamber to repeat the process.

Strategy: When a bill is on the floor for consideration by the body, school officials no longer have an opportunity to offer direct testimony in favor or against the idea. Thus it is important to line up support among the legislators *before* a bill reaches the floor.

4. The Committee Process Again

Once a bill passes one legislative body and is sent to the other, the presiding officer will introduce the bill and assign it to the committees in which it will be heard. Thus the committee hearing process begins again.

If there are major changes to the bill by the time it passes the second body, the bill will go back to the original body for concurrence. If that body concurs, or agrees with the changes, the bill will be passed and moved on to the governor for his or her signature. If the body in which the bill originated fails to concur with the changes, a conference committee will be appointed.

Strategy: Monitoring a bill at this point in the process is just as important as monitoring a bill in the body in which the bill originated — and for the same reasons. Changes can be made to the bill; it can get stuck in committee; or it may fail to pass a vote of the legislative body.

School officials need to be as diligent at following the progress of a bill through this legislative body as through the body of origin.

5. The Conference Committee

If changes are made to a bill as it passes through the second legislative body, a conference committee is convened. A conference committee consists of members, usually three, from each legislative body. The committee meets to work out the differences between the house and senate versions of the bill. Usually, but not always, the conference committee is restricted to looking at and agreeing on only the house or senate *changes* to a bill, not the substance of the bill itself. If the conference committee comes to an agreement, the bill normally is passed by the house and the senate and then sent to the governor. If the members of the conference committee fail to agree, the bill fails. This is what is meant by the phrase, "the bill died in committee."

Strategy: If school district officials are concerned about a bill that has gone to a conference committee, then they should attempt to muster the support of committee members prior to their deliberations. However, school officials should be prepared to offer acceptable compromise options to their committee supporters, as an agreement in the conference committee likely will demand some compromises from all sides.

6. The Role of the Governor

When a bill reaches the governor's desk, he or she has three options. The first option is to sign the bill in-

to law. The second is to let the bill pass into law without the signature of the governor. (This option may be exercised to show that, while the governor will allow the bill to become law for political considerations, he or she does not agree with it.) The third option is to veto the bill. If the bill is vetoed, it will take an override of both bodies of the legislature to pass it.

Strategy: School officials should not ignore the governor's office. They should consult with the governor's office about a bill and find out if the bill is acceptable to the governor before it goes through the legislative process. In this way it may be possible to determine if changes can be made to an unacceptable or questionable bill in order to make it acceptable to the governor before the legislative hurdles are jumped.

The Rhythm of the Legislature

Successfully influencing the legislative process depends, in part, on understanding the rhythm of legislative work. That means knowing 1) when it is most appropriate to ask legislators to visit schools, 2) when to talk with legislators about school district priorities, and 3) when to take action in support of an important piece of legislation. Understanding this rhythm is as important as understanding the formal process of how a bill becomes law.

Because legislative sessions last for two years, each year has a beginning, middle, and end. At the start of the two-year session is a period referred to below as the *presession*. And in between the years is a period referred to as the *interim session*. I touch on these two periods first, and then take up the annual beginning-middle-end rhythm.

The Presession

The time between the end of one legislative session and the start of a new one is known as the *presession*. During the presession:

- All members of the house of representatives are up for election or re-election;
- Half of the members of the senate are up for election; and
- All legislation that was still in committee at the end of the last legislative session ceases to exist.

Prior to the election, the primary focus of the candidates is on getting elected or re-elected. Candidates may spend time visiting schools and listening to issues, but their primary concern will be getting elected. Senators who are not up for re-election will have more time to deal with issues.

Following the election, everyone's focus shifts to organizing the house and senate leadership, as well as selecting committee chairs and determining committee membership, even though such committees will not become official until a vote of the body is taken on the opening day of the new legislature. Many officials' attention also turns to prefiling new legislation and, for those newly elected, to hiring their office staff.

The presession also is a time for educators to establish legislative priorities, to assign responsibilities for developing and maintaining the government relations program of the school district at both the school board and administrative levels, and to build coalitions among key communicators, internal and external publics, and governing bodies and agencies.

Following the election, school officials should send congratulatory notes to the newly elected (or re-elected) legislators. They should schedule meetings with all

newly elected officials, especially those that they did not meet with prior to the election. School officials should be prepared to share the district's legislative priorities with these contacts and to seek sponsorship of key legislative initiatives.

The Interim Session

The time between the two sessions of a legislative term is known as the *interim session*. During an interim session:

- No legislators are up for election;
- All bills not passed by the legislature remain in the committee they were in at the end of the first session; and
- Leadership and committee assignments usually remain the same.

The interim session is a time to thank legislators for laws passed and to review the status of bills that are still in committee. For school officials the interim session also is a time to go over any new legislative priorities with key supporters in the legislature and to consider new legislation to be introduced during the second session. Legislators should be encouraged to visit the schools they represent during this period. And, because most of the legislators should be well-known by this time, the interim session also should provide opportunities to engage in less formal relationship-building through casual meetings and exchanges of information.

The Beginning of a Legislative Session

The start of a new legislative session sees the election of new leadership, assignment of offices, hiring of aides, and assignment to committees. It may take a few weeks at the beginning of a new legislative session for school officials to obtain a complete list of telephone and fax numbers and e-mail and office addresses for the members, as well as a complete list of the legislative aides, who often are the "frontline" contacts.

Following an interim session, however, with the exception perhaps of some changes in office staff, everything remains pretty much the same at the beginning of the second annual session as it was at the end of the preceding year.

The first few weeks of the legislative session, whether at the very beginning or following the interim session, are a good time to meet with legislators and their staffs to review legislative priorities and to discuss specific pieces of legislation and their progress (or lack of progress). Legislators usually have more time at the start of a session to meet with constituents than later, when the session is in full swing.

This period also is a good time for school officials to step up their work with the district's publics in order to build consensus on issues that are soon to be heard before the legislature.

The Middle of a Legislative Session

By the middle of the legislative session, committee meetings are in process. Bills are being debated; alliances

are being formed. There is still time at this point to meet with legislators for the purpose of reinforcing specific points, providing additional information, and addressing new concerns raised during committee hearings. However, mid-session primarily is a time to monitor legislation as it goes through the committee hearing process and to testify (or arrange for someone to testify) before committees on important issues. The middle of the legislative session also is the time to begin to apply constituent and media pressure on legislators through letters to the editor and personal contacts.

The End of a Legislative Session

The closing days of a legislative session often are the most crucial in the legislative process. When the legislature is rushing toward adjournment, sometimes many key issues are unresolved; this is a time when deals can be struck and compromises are made. It is a time when issues can be resolved — either moved toward passage and the governor's signature or, if the bill is contrary to the interests of the school district, defeated or left to die in committee.

A lack of vigilance and action on the part of school officials at this point can mean the difference between success or failure in achieving the district's legislative objectives. The final days of the legislative session are a time of tension for legislators, their staffs, and for all those involved in the political process. Thus a delicate balance must be maintained during the end of the session. School officials should be available in person, by

phone, or through the district's lobbyist in order to provide information at a moment's notice and to provide support for a piece of legislation. During the final week or weeks of the legislative session, school officials with a stake in legislation can expect long days, long delays, and long nights. They can expect to wait in the halls outside legislators' offices in order to catch them for a few seconds on their way to committee meetings. And they can expect that committee meetings will go late into the night, will be rescheduled without notice, and will be canceled abruptly.

As the session draws to a close, the competition among lobbyists and constituents to gain access to the elected officials for support for their causes becomes more intense and difficult. The end of the session, in particular, is the time when a lobbyist earns his or her pay, for everything is "on the line," and delivering for a client may mean the difference between having a job or not having a job with them next session.

The Regulatory Process

A bill has become law. It has made its way through the legislative process and been signed by the governor. The time has now arrived for regulations to be written. However, what are regulations? Who writes them? Who approves them? What guides the regulatory process? More important, how can educators have a say in drafting the regulations that implement the new law? These are important questions, for the regulatory process and those government officials cast as the regulators have a great deal of power within the framework of the law in determining how laws are administered and thus how they affect the school district.

Regulations and Regulators

Regulations are the rules that are adopted by an agency of the executive branch of government under the authority of a law passed by the legislature. For public school districts, the primary state executive agency with which it deals is the state department of education. For example, in Alaska there are more than 180 pages of ed-

ucation regulations. The regulations cover everything from the length of the school day and school year to the employment and evaluation of professional employees; from the transportation of pupils to exchange teachers and student teachers; and from facility planning to actual construction.

A recent and controversial piece of legislation passed by the Alaska state legislature was HB 465, relating to employment of teachers and school administrators and to public school collective bargaining. This law serves to illustrate the role of the regulatory process and its effect on public schools in Alaska; it typifies the types of changes in laws and regulations being faced by school districts in states across the nation.

HB 465 is controversial because of what it set out to accomplish. It extends, for example, the length of time it takes for a teacher to acquire tenure; it requires school districts to develop a more thorough evaluation system; it makes available to the public various negotiation proposals; and it changes the dismissal and appeal process. As might be imagined, a bill with sweeping changes such as these did not move easily through the legislative process. In fact, it took two years, the introduction of several related bills, a governor's task force, and hard negotiating and lobbying by school districts and professional associations before an acceptable bill passed the legislature and made its way to the governor's desk for approval. It was a long and bitter battle that saw school boards opposing teacher groups, professional organizations engaged in debate with each other on how sweeping the changes in the law should be, and, at one

point, attorneys with opposing viewpoints testifying before the state legislature.

However, passing HB 465 was only the first step. Drafting and adopting the regulations was the second. And, while the regulatory process did not involve the legislature, it was no less political or complex, nor less important.

The centerpiece of HB 465 was a new evaluation system for teachers and administrators. It required the state department of education to develop standards for the evaluation and improvement of performance, which were to be defined in the regulations. Furthermore, it required local public school boards to adopt an evaluation system for teachers and administrators based on these standards. The bill was signed into law by the governor on 16 May 1996. The evaluation component of the law was to go into effect on 1 July 1997. This meant that both the department of education and local public school systems had little more than a year to complete the task.

To accomplish this task within the specified time, a professional evaluation committee composed of parents, teachers, school administrators, and elected government officials came together to review existing evaluation systems and to assist in the development of the performance standards. The Alaska Association of School Boards played a pivotal role with the department of education in organizing the effort. The committee met throughout the fall and completed its task. The state board of education then adopted the standards into regulation at its January 1997 meeting.

Influencing the Regulatory Process

In routine cases the department of education will draft regulations and then issue them to local school districts and to all interested parties with a request for written comments. Such comments will be required to be submitted within a specified period, normally 30 to 90 days. Then, at the next regularly scheduled state school board meeting following the closing date for written comments, the state board of education may modify the draft regulations and will adopt them (and other proposals dealing with the same subject) without further notice to the public. Educators and others may offer testimony at this state school board meeting, which may influence the shape of the final regulations. But such testimony often comes too late in the process to produce any significant changes.

The development and use of the professional evaluation committee in the development of regulations for HB 465 represented an extraordinary effort by the state department of education, but it also demonstrated a nationwide trend to incorporate more points of view in the development of regulations. School districts might work to increase the use of this and similar public involvement strategies in order to better shape regulations that are useful and productive for schools.

In addition to developing regulations for new laws or laws modified by the state legislature, existing regulations also may be reviewed by the department of education. This means that the regulatory process is an ongoing one, demanding that school officials be con-

stantly aware of potential changes in order to intervene as necessary. Additionally, school districts may want to seek changes in regulations and so may wish to develop strategies for communicating their needs to the department of education. If such strategies fail to produce necessary changes, school officials may choose to seek remedies by urging new legislation or through redress in the courts.

School Public Relations and the Political Process

As I reflect on past legislative sessions and interactions with regulatory agencies, I believe we need a new way of looking at school public relations. We need new communication strategies if effective government relations are to be maintained with legislative bodies and regulatory agencies in the future. Public relations must involve both the internal and external publics of the schools, not only in terms of supporting the schools but also in defining the programs and policies that govern schools.

Too often school people see public relations solely as a communications process, rather than as a relationship-building process. In so doing, we fail to involve our various publics — teachers, administrators, parents, nonparents, business people, and so on, including legislators and government officials — in the ownership of the schools and their important work. To be successful in generating legislative support for public education,

it no longer is sufficient to be merely an advocate for public education. It is essential that educators build effective relationships with all of the school's publics. To accomplish this, school people need to develop a close association between the government relations program and the public affairs or public relations program of a school district.

While the goals of an effective government relations program are to get the funding, statutory, and regulatory needs of the school district understood and met, a school district cannot ignore what the legislature or other agencies are saying about it. Educators often are so concerned about getting their message out that the message of those outside education does not get in. Thus the need to listen cannot be overstated in the political and the public relations processes. And such listening must go beyond the superficial, the "I hear what you are saying" stage. School people must demonstrate a willingness to be responsive to the concerns and criticisms when appropriate.

Maintaining effective public relationships will gain significance in the coming years as the current trend continues to shift education responsibilities from the federal government to the state government and from state government to local government. To ignore this trend, particularly the shifting of fiscal obligations from state to local government, is an invitation to disaster for the local school district. In the future, local education will be competing for limited dollars with a host of other local services, many of them previously funded at the federal level or state level yet still required by law —

even though funding is not provided from the level of government that mandates the service.

School people must recognize that public education often is viewed as only one of many public services for which local government must pay from the same revenue sources, usually generated from the local taxpayers. In so doing, educators will then see themselves as part of, and not separate from, the constellation of community services and local government. This is an important semantic point. Educators must move beyond thinking in terms such as "the" school district, "the" mayor's office, and "the" legislature. If the schools are to succeed in meeting the educational needs of all students, then school people above all must recognize that the schools are "our" public schools, that the local government is "our" government, and that the legislature is "our" legislature. In doing so, school people demonstrate that they recognize that all citizens have a responsibility for what government does and how it responds to the needs of its citizenry, including educators.

The people who must support education — who are the school's "public" — also are members of other "publics" that are competing for the same dollars. They want better roads, better police protection, and safer drinking water, as well as better schools. Many of these school supporters have seen changes in their work environment with the introduction of technology and corporate downsizing, and they expect schools to act similarly. Thus there is a continuing need on the part of school people to educate their publics to the needs of schools and to differentiate those needs from the needs of business, government, and other entities.

Politicians are facing limited budgets with competing interests. For them to support education, school people need to give them the tools to do so. Educators can not assume that bureaucrats, legislators, and other elected officials—including school board members—will support what they do not understand. Educators, in point of fact, cannot assume that these publics will support today's system of education, because their personal vision of education may be drawn only from their own student experiences of 10, 20, or 30 years past. Therefore, the central public relations challenge is one of teaching the school's publics about the nature of today's education and what the schools will need to meet the needs of current and future students.

Particular attention must be paid to the school's internal public, its employees. School districts, like other institutions, often ignore the role that their employees play in school public relations and the government relations process. All employees contribute value to the organization through their work, and every employee has a role to play as a member of the organization's public relations/government relations team through their contact with community citizens and elected officials. Too often, school officials fail to listen to school employees, because their energies and attention are consumed in trying to deal with the external publics. However, failing to recognize or appreciate school employees as a valuable public can raise serious problems. School people need to be a cohesive team with many players. And such failure can result in internal strife that detracts from the external efforts to obtain statutes and regulations that benefit the schools.

Most teachers and administrators have little training in dealing with the legislature and the political process. Therefore, one aspect of the government relations program should be staff development. School employees need basic training in thinking and acting politically if they are to be supportive in the government relations endeavor.

Speaking for the Schools

Usually the school board president or his or her designee should be the primary contact for legislative matters. But the message should represent the entire school board. Even if a board member disagrees with the majority position, he or she should be careful in speaking publicly to differentiate his or her personal position from the official position.

Effective government relations can be achieved more readily when all school people speak with a united voice. Principals and central office administrators, in particular, can and often do affect the political process by how they deal with the news media. Most administrators and school board members dislike dealing with the media, because they do not want to embarrass themselves or be misquoted. More important, at the height of a crisis situation in which the media might become involved, the primary concern of the administrator is for the safety and rights of the students and employees of the schools, not the public relations image of the school district.

While the media cannot be controlled, providing training to board members, principals, and key admin-

istrators in dealing with the media is essential for developing a good public relations foundation that will help lead to effective government relations. Furthermore, it is helpful for school people to get to know the local media representatives and what they know about education. By building the communication networks and creating positive relationships with these representatives, the media will feel freer to seek out the views of informed educators when legislative questions arise.

In summary, making the connection between legislation and the schools work means:

- Understanding the political process and how to influence it;
- Listening to the school's many publics, both internal and external, and being responsive to those voices; and
- Building positive relationships among all those involved in and concerned about public schools.

As important as affecting the legislative and regulatory processes that influence how schools operate — and with what means — is being open, as school people, to change, to doing things better and perhaps differently within our schools. All school people — from school board member to school custodian — must demonstrate their willingness to communicate with one another and to make effective communications and government relations an ongoing commitment. In effective government relations, tomorrow's successes are built on today's practices.

Appendix: A Primer on Legislative Protocol

Much criticism is directed at the political process; at politicians and, in particular, legislators; and at those who work to affect the political process, such as lobbyists. Everyone involved in government relations must view such criticism with two questions in mind: What am I doing to contribute to the sources of such criticism? and How am I going to respond?

Just as helping to solve the problems of education rests with all educators, so, too, does helping to change the nature of the political/legislative process. How school people respond to the pressures of the legislative session will define both educators and the political process itself.

Engaging in the political process will test anyone's mettle. Before entering the arena, school officials should take the time to reflect on their own codes of ethics. They should understand what they are willing and unwilling to do to compromise in order to obtain success (or

partial success) in legislative and regulatory endeavors. Codes of ethics, such as those of the Public Relations Society of America, which asks that its members *conduct themselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public*, can be instructive. In addition, the following statements may serve as a primer on legislative protocol.

- Respect the institution — the government, the legislature, the governor's office, the political/legislative process. It may not be perfect; but belittling it, rather than working to change it, will not make it more effective.
- Respect the position if not the person. Legislators were elected by voters. They may not all meet one's personal standards for being a legislator, nor will they necessarily hold the "right" view on the vital issues; but treat each legislator with respect.
- Know and use legislators' proper titles — senator, representative, governor — and address written correspondence appropriately. When speaking to a legislator, let the situation dictate the form of address. While one may be on a first-name basis in an informal setting, in public a legislator should be addressed with his or her formal title.
- When calling on government officials, dress appropriately. Formal meetings call for professional (business) attire, as do appearances before committees.
- Know the issues, the pros and the cons. Legislators are busy people, and few have time for long-winded

explanations. Be able to explain the matter at issue concisely and clearly.

- When dealing with the sponsor of a bill of interest, be clear in expressing concerns. Know the sponsor's positions in order to respond directly to them. Know the points on which compromise will be acceptable.
- When testifying, always thank the committee chair and the committee for the opportunity to present your position, even if they disagree with your position.
- Always attack the issue, never the person.

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Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation

The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation was established on 13 October 1966 with the signing, by Dr. George H. Reavis, of the irrevocable trust agreement creating the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation Trust.

George H. Reavis (1883-1970) entered the education profession after graduating from Warrensburg Missouri State Teachers College in 1906 and the University of Missouri in 1911. He went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. Dr. Reavis served as assistant superintendent of schools in Maryland and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1929 he was appointed director of instruction for the Ohio State Department of Education. But it was as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Cincinnati public schools (1939-48) that he rose to national prominence.

Dr. Reavis' dream for the Educational Foundation was to make it possible for seasoned educators to write and publish the wisdom they had acquired over a lifetime of professional activity. He wanted educators and the general public to "better understand (1) the nature of the educative process and (2) the relation of education to human welfare."

The Phi Delta Kappa fastbacks were begun in 1972. These publications, along with monographs and books on a wide range of topics related to education, are the realization of that dream.